OLD JINSHICHI

By JOJI TSUBOTA

This is one of the finest examples of recent Japanese literature we have met with. In this story the author, well known to Japanese readers for his wonderful understanding of children, spans the wide range from childhood to old age. The story was translated from the Japanese by Kurt Meissner of Tokyo.—K.M.

OLD Jinshichi with his eighty years no longer had any desire for definite undertakings. At the most, he looked forward to his meals, although for some years now he had only been having two meals a day. Now and again he would order this or that special dish; but when it appeared on the table, prepared specially for him, the old man did not enjoy it as much as he had expected. The best thing for his empty stomach was still hot rice with fried horse-radish. For the rest, he had only one pleasure left: to walk around everywhere and to look at things. When we say "everywhere" we do not mean far-off places. No, he only felt an urge to visit places which held some memory from his eighty years of life, like the stone bridge near by or the willow tree at the edge of the village. Suddenly it would occur to him to wonder what had happened to it, or how it looked there now; then, leaning on his stick, he would set off to see for himself. Perhaps he was driven by a hidden desire to take a lingering farewell of every blade of grass in this world before his death. But he was by no means conscious of any such idea. He simply enjoyed looking at this or that and the memories they brought to him.

Today, as on every other morning, he was sitting on the open veranda running round his house, smoking a little pipe of tobacco, and looking out into the garden. Suddenly he felt a desire to go to the cemetery. Not that he wanted to visit any graves there; he just wanted to enjoy the view from the cemetery hill. Possibly he thought that, when he was buried there himself, he would have to look at that scenery on all four sides, and now he wanted to take a look in advance.

"Ooi! Ooi!" This was the way he always called for Grandmother.

"Haai, hai," came the reply after a little pause, and soon Grandmother came herself.

"Have the horse saddled!"

"The wooden horse?"

For some years now, the old man had not been strong enough to ride on a real horse. But in order now and again still to enjoy the feeling of sitting on a horse, he had had one made of wood and placed in a corner of the yard. Today, however, the old fellow was not thinking of his wooden horse: he wanted something quite different.

"Silly fool," he exploded, "what nonsense you talk! How can I go for a ride on the wooden horse!"

"But a real horse is too dangerous!"

"Never mind, never mind! Have it saddled!"

"But a real horse jumps and kicks. It's not like a wooden horse."

"I've already told you—never mind. And I mean never mind!"

"Hai, hai!" Grandmother disappeared into the kitchen and said to the servant: "Sakzo, you are to saddle a horse, a live horse!"

Sakzo was dumfounded. "What? The master really wants to ride?"

"Yes, evidently he doesn't like the wooden horse any more, and now he wants to sit once again on a real horse. I expect he'll only get onto it when it's tied up in the yard, and then he'll shout 'Hoi ho hoi ho.' When I hear that, I don't know whether to feel ashamed or to laugh. I really feel sorry for him."

So Sakzo led a horse out of the stable, tied it to a post with its head well up, laid the saddle on its back, and put the bit in its mouth. Then he went to his master.

"Great Danna-san! The horse is ready."

"All right, I'm coming." The old man had put on riding clothes. A bamboo whip in his hand, he came out into the yard. When he was still four or five steps away, he called out soothing words to the horse, then he patted its neck.

Sakzo had carefully placed a box with two steps under the stirrup to make it easier for his master to mount.

"Oh, that's very nice," said the old man, mounted the steps, stuck the hem of his riding gown in his belt, arranged the reins, and settled in the saddle. The horse made a few steps. "Now, now, now," said the old man soothingly, and then, turning to Sakzo: "Call Sampei! We're going to ride out to our graves today."

"Hai!" Sakzo went to the kitchen and called out: "Bot'chan! Your grandfather says he'll let you ride!"

"Good!" Sampei came skipping along at once. He was followed by Grandmother, bringing the old man's high hat. But she began to reproach him again: "Have you quite forgotten how you fell off the horse that time?"

The old fellow did not deign to reply. Proudly mounted, he stuck out his chest. But Grandmother still would not relent: "If you want to go to the graves, you can go by carriage. And you can ride here in the yard!"

The old man paid no attention, thrust out his chin, and did not reply.

"It's all because you're so cocky that you always forget how old you are!" The old woman mumbled this as if she were talking to herself. Meanwhile, Sampei had already mounted from the case and was sitting on the horse in front of his grandfather.

The old man was in fine spirits. "Well, how do you like it, Sampei? A fine horse, eh?" And then he added: "As soon as we are out of the village, we'll gallop—like on the racecourse!"

But Grandmother was ready with an answer: "What? Gallop? You can't possibly do that!" But then she saw Sakzo taking the reins and getting ready to lead the horse to the gate. So she quickly called out: "Sakzo! Look out for the motorcars! And see to it that, whatever happens, master gets off at the foot of the cemetery hill. Don't ever let go of the reins!"

Indeed, it really looked dangerous, the way the oldster with his high hat and six-year-old Sampei sat on their horse. Not only in Grandmother's eyes, but in everyone else's too. They were not riding: they were obviously just sitting on top of a horse.

Nevertheless, they paid no attention to Grandmother and her anxiety. "Giddy-ap, let's go," said the old man and laughed. The two were already swaying about on their steed, and the old man said to Sampei: "Our grandmother doesn't understand. If we were to listen to her, we couldn't do a thing. Eh, Sampei?"

SOON they were crossing the stone bridge at the end of the village. Beyond a rape field in full bloom and a gum-tree plantation, they could already make out the hill with the white gravestones.

"Only up to there," said the old man, "we'll easily manage that." By now they were on the path on the other side of the bridge which led along the stream. Suddenly there was a sound from the water.

"Hey! What was that?"

"What?" Sakzo stopped the horse which he was leading by the bridle and looked into the water.

"Ah, master! A catfish, a huge catfish! Must be about three feet long!"

"What, a catfish? I see, hm. . . . Couldn't we catch it?"

"Yes, we probably could, if we had a net or a fishing rod. But you can't catch a catfish with your bare hands."

"Oh yes, of course. But let's get down from the horse. Eh, Sampei? We two would also like to take a look at the catfish." So Sakzo lifted first Sampei and then the old man, one after another, off the horse. The old man immediately looked down from the bank into the dark shadow of the water plants at the bottom of the stream.

"I'd like to catch that one," he said, and Sampei added at once:

"I too!"

"Yes, you would, wouldn't you?" said his grandfather, delighted with the little boy's support. He turned to Sakzo:

"Listen, Sakzo, run back home quickly and fetch the net and a fishing rod. In the meantime, we two will keep an eye on the fish."

"Yes, yes."

"You can take the horse and ride."

"Yes, yes." Sakzo mounted and galloped off toward the village.

The old man and Sampei squatted on the bank of the stream and stared into the water. Each was murmuring to himself:

"Don't swim away! Don't swim away!"

"Go to sleep, big catfish, go to sleep!"

Now they would stretch out their heads, now they would draw them in again between their shoulders. Five minutes passed, ten minutes, twenty minutes.

"Whatever is the fellow doing? What a long time he's taking! Perhaps he can't find the net, or the fishing rod? Surely he hasn't gone to sleep somewhere?" The old man looked in the direction of the village, then back at the catfish and the stream, and in doing so he again remembered an incident from his young days: "In this stream your grandfather once caught a catfish four feet long."

"Really?"

"It was in August, on an evening during the hottest time. I had put a green frog on the end of my hook. We used to move the frog in such a way that it looked as if it were jumping around close to the edge of the water. And then the big catfish came with a leap—I thought my rod would snap! Nowadays they don't have such big catfish around here any more. After all, it must be nearly sixty years ago—"

"Look, he's coming, he's coming!"

They could already hear the loud clop-pity-clop of the hoofs. Sakzo was carrying the long fishing rod on his shoulder. At the lower end of the rod dangled the basket. Because the horse was galloping, the fishing rod swung up and down against the sky. The basket danced about wildly, sometimes bumping against Sakzo's head. And that was not all. He had stuck the rolled-up net through his belt like a sword. He looked very imposing, like a robber on horseback, as he came bravely galloping along on his steed. But Grandfather was by no means pleased by such a display of courage. The catfish might be scared away by the noise of the hoofs!

So he quickly got up with the words: "He's coming, he's coming, but with too much noise!" and, his gaze still riveted on the bed of the stream, moved a few steps toward Sakzo. Then he spread out both arms; it seemed as if he wanted to stop the horse in full gallop:

"Thank you for the trouble!"

Sakzo tore at the reins; he barely managed to bring his horse to a halt just in front of the old man. He mumbled something and handed down the fishing rod first. Then he handed over the basket, and finally he undid the net from his hip. At this very moment Sampei shouted: "Oh the catfish —the catfish has got away!"

The old man and Sakzo ran toward the spot where Sampei was standing. Craning their necks, they looked into the stream. But it didn't help—there was no trace of the big catfish. All three of them stood there speechless, thunderstruck. There was nothing to be done about it.

Suddenly the old man broke out into peals of laughter. "Why, of course we were not right to want to kill a living creature just on the way to the graves. What a good thing it escaped!"

Sakzo agreed as he wiped the sweat off his face: "Yes, that's what Oku-san said too. She scolded me terribly for it."

This again made Grandfather laugh out loud! But then they finally started off once more on their trip to the graves. Fishing rod, basket, and net now proved a nuisance. They looked around, but there was nothing in the vicinity but rape fields and gum trees. So they hid the three articles in a gum-tree plantation; on the way back they would pick them up again here and take them home. The old man and Sampei were lifted up onto the horse

again, Sakzo took it by the bridle, and they moved off at a comfortable pace.

AT the point where the path began to rise, Sakzo said: "Danna-san, what about it? Great Oku-san said that master should get off before the slope began. It is dangerous here."

But the old fellow would hear nothing of it. "What are you talking about! Just where it starts going uphill we are to get off? Do you mean to say that old people should climb mountains? That would be pure murder!"

"Well, all right, but then let's ride up as slowly as possible."

Around the many bends and windings the path made here, they finally arrived at the cemetery at the top. There they dismounted, and the old man had the horse tied up in the grove. Then he climbed up the last bit to the graves of his ancestors. But here he neither sacrificed incense, nor did he think of folding his hands. All he said was: "Ah, a fine view indeed." And he drew himself up and looked in all four directions.

"Well, Sampei, isn't our country beautiful?"

Toward the east one could see the old castle near the town, to the south the white sails on the Inland Sea. To the north there were only hills and mountain ranges. In the west the long ribbon of the river sparkled in the plain, and behind it ran, like a little toy, a train drawing its plume of smoke behind it.

Having looked into the distance to his heart's content, the old man began to give his attention to what lay near by. On the west side there lay a little wood at the sight of which our old friend suddenly felt a desire to release birds here!

Long, long ago, yes, seventy years ago, when the old man's father had died, birds had been given their liberty here at this spot. They had been rice birds and pigeons and some other birds. They had been let loose from pretty baskets. At first all these birds had flown with a whirr of wings to that wood over there; sitting on the branches they had chattered excitedly and had flown from tree to tree. What the rice birds had done then, the old man had forgotten. But the three white pigeons, they had flown up high into the sky and then, in a beautiful straight line, had disappeared toward Okayama. As a little boy he had followed the flight of the pigeons till he could not make them out any longer. Under the blue sky he had seen how the white wings of the pigeons had moved up and down and how they disappeared into the distance. This sight had remained deep behind his eyes to this very day.

But now he wanted to see it once again. So he said to Sakzo: "Listen, Sakzo!"

"Yes?"

"I am sorry to trouble you again, but you must go quickly into town and buy some birds."

"*What?*"

"Yes, I would like to set free some birds here."

"Oh."

"Two or three pigeons and a few small birds, any kind will do. You must buy five or six birds!"

"Yes, sir!"

Sakzo's face remained unmoved, but inwardly he did not altogether approve. However, he descended to the grove, led out the horse, and grumbled at the animal: "The old chap!" Then he mumbled a few more words, clicked his tongue, and rode down the slope.

For a while the old man followed Sakzo with his eyes as he rode off toward the village; but then he finally became aware of Sampei standing next to him. Sampei had nothing to do, he stood there looking bored. The sight of him brought back memories of the old man's own youth. When he was as old as Sampei, he had once evoked a distant echo here by loud calls. At that time, when he had heard the echo, he had had the feeling that a lot of children's voices were coming from that valley there and that mountain over there. There seemed to be children everywhere, among whom he himself was in a large, joyous company. He had recently thought of this from time to time and felt a desire to hear this once more. So he said to the boy now: "Sampei! Do you know what an echo is?"

"Yes, of course!"

"Let's try here! It's great fun."

Sampei smiled and called: "Oooi!"

".....Oooi."

".....Oooi."

"Who is the-e-re?"

".....Who is the-e-re?"

".....Who is the-e-re?"

"Yes, that's fun," said the old man. He sat down on a gravestone, pulled out his tobacco pouch, and filled his pipe. While he smoked, he told Sampei about the pigeons and the little birds which Sakzo was probably just buying. But then Sakzo's mounted figure appeared on the path from the village.

"Grandfather! Sakzo is coming back!" Sampei was the first to notice.

"Mm. That's remarkably quick!"

Sakzo was already beginning to ascend the hill. Now one could see quite clearly that he was not carrying a single basket.

"Grandfather, he isn't bringing any birds!"

"Isn't he? Indeed. I wonder what can be the matter?"

Having arrived at the grove, Sakzo dismounted, tied up the horse, and came running up to the cemetery.

"Danna-san! It can't be done. Great Oku-san is terribly angry!"

"Hahaha," the old man laughed, "yes, Grandmother is stingy—hahaha—I had already been wondering what she would have to say!"

"Yes, you are to come home at once, I am to tell you."

The old man burst out laughing again. But there was nothing to be done about it. So Grandfather and Sampei, with Sakzo pushing them, climbed up onto the horse again, and off they went, at first very slowly and carefully down the cemetery hill.

"The old woman doesn't understand a thing, does she, Sakzo? Women are all fools." The old man up on his horse went on talking to himself in this vein for a long time.

THE following night he had a dream. He dreamed he was already dead. Yes, quite dead. So he should really not have been in this world, this village, this house any more, but he was still here. Although this was contrary to all reason, that is the way the dream was. What surprised him most was that, in spite of his death, nothing had changed in the least. He went here and there. In the tea room there still stood the table, the long fire brazier with the little drawers, the iron kettle, the round wooden bowl for the boiled rice. He lifted the lid of the bowl and, sure enough, there was really rice in it.

"Nothing has changed," he said in astonishment. Then he went into the village to have a look round there too. As he came out of the gate he met Kinsaku. He was carrying his hoe on his shoulder and was on his way to the fields.

"Kinsaku-san, the village hasn't changed a bit," he said questioningly and wanted to add: "you know, I have died." But he could not get out the words, he simply could not say it. But why he could not say it, he did not know.

"No, nothing has changed," Kinsaku confirmed.

"Is your persimmon tree bearing fruit again?"

"This year there were a lot of caterpillars in it. They have eaten all the leaves."

"Have they? Then I suppose the caterpillars are stinging again?"

"Yes, of course. They are tiger-hair caterpillars."

And then he stood in front of a tree trunk. He could not tell where. On the trunk sat a cicada. It chirped: "Jiiii-jiririri-jiiii. . . ."

"The cicadas chirp here too," thought Jinshichi.

Then a boy came in view. He had on a white shirt, white trousers, and a light hat with a wide brim. Everything about him was bright and clear. Well, if it wasn't Sampei! And, since it was Sampei, he would have to speak to him. But then again he did not like to do this. He was afraid he might somehow frighten Sampei; for, after all, he himself was dead . . . . But this sight, too, proved that nothing changes in the world after death.

The old man's heart felt light and gay. Now he would like to have gone to the stone bridge to take one more look at the catfish hiding in the holes of the embankment. But he decided not to and went home. In the back room he pulled out a small drawer in the chest. There had

always been some money in it. When he looked in, he found everything unchanged even here. There stood the little money box. Three or four silver fifty-sen pieces twinkled in it, and among them lay a few copper coins. In one corner, carefully folded, lay some notes. There seemed to be two or three ten-yen notes. . . .

At about this point the old man woke up. But even when awake he still had a strange sensation. He did not know whether he was alive or whether he had already died. He raised his body slightly and looked around him. There was complete darkness everywhere, not a glimmer of light. He cleared his throat: "ehem . . . ." Then Grandmother next door also cleared her throat. Now only did the old man know he was still alive.

"Oh, it was only a dream," he said to himself and crawled back under his covers.

THE following morning he sat up on his bedclothes, and in doing so remembered the dream, which caused him to feel amazement again. But now he did not feel amazed that nothing changed in this world after death; he only felt astonishment at having believed that the world should change after death. After all, there was no reason for it to change—that is what he felt now.

When, for example, one has been absent from school for many days, one might perhaps think that there must have been a lot of changes in the school meanwhile. In reality, however, nothing changes at all. It is just that people all believe it does. The old man chuckled as he thought this. In the end, death is nothing else than being absent from this world, simply staying away from it. One simply disappears from the world. And so dying is nothing so extraordinary as one has always imagined all one's life.

But when one thinks about such matters one remembers a lot of things one has enjoyed on this earth. This and that, one after another, come to one's mind, things one would like to see once more.

During breakfast Jinshichi said to Grandmother: "Grandmother, I believe it's a long time since I saw a rainbow."

"Is it?" Grandmother was thinking: I wonder what he wants now? She tried to be as noncommittal as possible.

"Aren't there any more rainbows nowadays?"

"Yes, of course there are."

"I see—well, then I want to be told when there is one."

"But rainbows always disappear so quickly again, there wouldn't be time enough to call you. Why don't you go out when it's raining and look for yourself!"

Now the old man was furious. For a while he was quite silent. But then a new idea occurred to him: "Grandmother, haven't some small birds built a nest somewhere?"

"Most likely they have."

"Where have they built it?"

"I don't pay attention to such things. Why don't you let Sakzo look for one?"

"Hm—yes, please call him."

Sakzo was called.

"Have some small birds built a nest somewhere?"

"Well, I couldn't say offhand. Does the master wish to have a nest taken down from a tree?"

"No, I'd only like to look into one."

"Oh, I see." Sakzo looked as if he did not quite agree.

The memory had returned to the old man of a nest into which he had once looked in his young days. He still remembered how prettily the little birds had sat on their fairy-like eggs. He felt that he could not die before seeing this once more. But it was not only the nest he wanted to see. At that time, when he had looked into the nest, he had climbed a very high tree, and

from there he had had a bird's-eye view of the whole village. That had been wonderful, and he wanted to see that once more now.

He said to Sakzo: "Place a ladder against the persimmon tree behind the barn."

"What? What do you want a ladder for?"

"Hm—I want to climb up afterwards."

"*Wha-a-t?*"

Sakzo and Grandmother, too, of course, were thoroughly alarmed: "The things you think of! You're eighty years old, not a heedless boy up to tricks. I am sure Sampei will laugh at you!"

"Hold your tongue, Grandmother! What do you know about it?"

"A lot! I know a great deal about it! You only want to climb up very high somewhere so that afterwards you can brag to everyone how strong you still are. But there's not a single person who will admire you for doing such a thing. They'll only laugh at you. Sakzo! The ladder is not to be placed against the tree!"

Now the old man was very angry. At least, if no nest could be found, he wanted to enjoy the bird's-eye view again. But it was useless to explain such things to Grandmother; it was impossible to carry out his plan now. So the old man made up his mind to carry out the ladder himself at the next opportunity.

When Grandmother noticed that the old man was silent and apparently in very ill humor, she said to console him: "If you really want to climb up high somewhere, why don't you simply go to the top floor and look out of the window? That will give you pleasure."

"Never mind, never mind. I wouldn't like to climb up anywhere if Sampei is going to laugh at me. Hahaha!"

That was telling her! Furious, Grandmother got up and went out. She went to the back rooms, although there was not the least thing for her to do there. As she went out she mumbled: "His tongue is the only agile thing about that old man!"

"What did you say?" Jinshichi called after her. "If anyone has an agile tongue around here, it's you!"

At last he was finished with his long-drawn-out breakfast. After he had smoked a little on the veranda he took his stick and went out. He had to take one more walk around the village. He said "one more," but he went every day. With every new day he felt that just today he had to take a look to see how the trees and branches looked.

THE following morning found the old man sitting again, as always, on the veranda of his house and smoking a pipe. He was ruminating as to whether there was not something nice to do again today.

"Oh yes," he suddenly said. He seemed to have thought of something nice. Although it was a little too early in the year for this, the old man wished now to see the decorations for the Boys' Festival in May.

"Grandmother!" Jinshichi always called for Grandmother, although she habitually scolded him. But in the course of the long years he had become accustomed always to call for Grandmother whenever he had something to say.

"Tell Sakzo to put up the mast for the carp banners in the garden."

"What kind of an idea is that? It's only April!"

"Why not in April? I can't wait till May. I'd like to see the Boys' Festival decorations because they are so jolly, so full of life."

"You really are a lot of trouble. People are already saying anyway that you are getting childish."

"Who cares what people say? But no one knows in this life what tomorrow will bring. As for me, before I take leave of this world I have a lot of things which I should like to see once more."

"All right, all right."

Grandmother withdrew. The old man looked after her for a while with a smile on his face. Now that he was alone he could smile at her. But then he heard Grandmother's voice:

"Sakzo, you are to put up the carp banners." And then to the maids: "Please fetch the knight dolls from the storehouse and set them up in the *tokonoma* in the living room."

Soon the armor of the dolls was shining in the rays of the spring sun. The old man enjoyed the spectacle all by himself. He was so pleased that he laughed. For two hours, three hours, he looked at the decorations. Now and again he drank some tea, smoked, drank some more tea, and smoked again. He gradually felt a little tired, stretched out on the veranda, and fell asleep, snoring gently. While asleep, he had another dream: in front of the veranda in the garden, men in long-maned lion masks were dancing the lion-dance. Others were beating drums and playing the flute. The flute went only ryu-ryu, the way the old fellow liked it. And from somewhere petals fell chuari-chuari on the dancing lions.

When the old man wakes up he will be sure to say that he would like to see a lion-dance.

But—this time it will be a long time before old Jinshichi wakes up.

Age does not make us childish, as is said,
It finds us only as true children still.

Goethe